THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
Press/Politics

Ninth conference of the International Journal of Press/Politics
(University of Edinburgh, 11-13 October 2023)

Understanding of the role of advocacy in a polarized state: Revisiting the construction of news

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Abstract

This work considers Malta, part of the understudied subject area of small states, and outlines a media system which is the product of a micro economy and unique societal culture. Taking a case-study approach, three news organisations are examined to understand the editorial routines, ownership and management structures, and social and cultural factors that affect the day-to-day business of creating news. To establish the fit between what is asserted by staff and what is actually taking place in the news-generation process, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders of each organisation are conducted alongside qualitative textual analysis of the content they publish. Contrary to previous research, advocacy continues to dominate Maltese journalism, indicating that the country has retained similarities to other media systems within its geographic region. However, this advocacy presents in different ways, influencing the nature of each organisation's respective reporting and reflecting individual workplace cultures, routines and ownership structures, as well as constituting a response to the politically involved society in which they operate. This conflicts with the ideal typification advanced by Hallin and Mancini. The findings highlight the merits of the Maltese tradition – found wanting in the US objectivity canon. In this small state, journalistic advocacy extends media diversity and contributes to the high level of political engagement among its population.

Key words:

advocacy, polarisation, framing, journalism, construction of news, pluralism

Introduction

An Inspection of the American Liberal media system shows that there has been steady sociological analysis of structures and work routines from North American sociologists collectively explaining the nature of journalism (Tuchman, 1978; Epstein, 1974; Molotoch, & Lester 1974; Schudson, 1981; Gans, 2004; Fishman, 1984; Gitlin, 1980). Their central argument is that the way news is gathered and presented determines that, in effect, journalists construct news. They conceptualised news construction and prompted the realisation that it is not useful to think of journalism as a means for the search for the truth. Their thesis was that news is the outcome of strategic work routines at news organisations which, ultimately, are production facilities, and it is difficult to comprehend the nature of news without getting to the heart of its manufacturing process.

However, their conclusions are anchored to the way news is constructed in the United States, creating a limited model by which other media systems are defined. Although this body of work presents a framework which aids our understanding of the news, it does not adequately explain the nuances of divergent media systems. To exemplify this, we turn to a highly polarised state, Malta, where Sammut (2007), in her ground-breaking work, indicated that the Maltese media system was in transition towards the American model, given that it is a negotiation between professional culture and market influence.

Within this context a three-fold argument is presented for looking at the United States and Malta as news models to help elucidate an understanding of polarisation and it corollary, advocacy journalism. First, because the US looms large in the literature and is the prism through which many people view their media system; as a result, it is enormously influential. Second, the United States is experiencing a significant rise in polarisation (Benkler, et al, 2018; Kelin, 2020) a state of being well understood by the Maltese media environment (Hillman,

2022). Third, Maltese exceptionalism is demonstrated through the extreme level of polarisation together with extraordinary democratic participation in general elections. At 85%, the country has the highest consistent voting turnout in the World (IDEA, 2022), a trend which goes counter to prevailing knowledge (Davis, 2019), and an understanding of this media system could act as a guide to other countries, as they drive headlong towards higher levels of polarisation, countries such as the US and the UK.

Further, this paper thus makes a reasoned argument for the need to pay closer attention to small states. If small states have similar political and media system arrangements to large states, then we are wasting valuable data by not including them in our analysis. If they are different then we are missing out on the insights that these diverse, extreme, deviant, or most different cases offer. When seeking generalizability, it can be argued that there are few, persuasive reasons that justify the omission of small states in the systematic way that has become accepted practice. Within this context, understanding the workings of polarisation and advocacy journalism becomes highly relevant.

Research design

This research uses case studies which differ from other forms of research strategy, in that they focus on a bounded case. It is the natural approach to use in this research, given the focus on news construction. Three news organisations are chosen, *Malta Today*, *Television Malta* (*TVM*) and *Times of Malta*. In terms of ownership, size and output, each organisation brings a different dimension to the discussion. All are national news organisations with websites ranking in the top ten in Malta. This is significant, as the key area of focus and data capture was from their online content. All three websites are published in English, with *TVM* also offering a Maltese version.

The research developed an understanding of each organisation, studied the individuals inside it and established the spheres of influence at work in each case. Being of a qualitative nature, it did not strive to be representative but focused on these news organisations at both the corporate and editorial levels. Their different ownership structures created a spectrum that added breadth to the findings and focused primarily on the news-construction elements within these organisations.

This research possessed three different instruments in its design which were complementary and converged to create an in-depth understanding of each case. The first level and primary method of data capture was in-depth interviews using an informal questioning approach precisely because of the need to acquire meaningful insights into what could be a complex understanding of news construction. The interviewees were executives and managers, editorial staff and (where possible) directors from each news organisation. Ten interviews were subsequently conducted for each case study, resulting in a total of thirty-four in-depth interviews, covering the executive and editorial arms of each organisation.

The second instrument in the research design enabled a fuller understanding of the media organisations and of the relationships between the individuals involved in them. Corporate background checks were conducted using the Malta Financial Services Authority (MFSA) database which provided the list of shareholders, memoranda and articles of each company, as well as basic audited accounts. This information revealed the structure of each organisation and the reasons for their creation.

The third research instrument used followed news events as they were covered by the organisations online, and examined the way in which stories were captured and narrated, paying particular attention to whom the contributing journalist was, and the diversity of sources reported and used. Textual analysis was employed to gather and analyse the data, the data being news content itself. Here, Curran et al. (2017) were followed, who reported that their qualitative

approach entailed reading, summarising, rereading and analysing patterns of meaning. Using three levels of research, a portrait of the organisations' structures was created that revealed where the influences and leadership roles within these organisations really existed.

News, and the construction of reality

Early news sociology work was prefaced by research conducted by White (1950) and Breed (1955) promoting a discussion on the construction of news, emphasising how gatekeeping elements transformed what was defined as news and how the socialisation of journalists influences its construction. From there, accounts of news work flourished in the '70s and '80s being mainly studies of an ethnographic nature, involving participant observation and in-depth first-hand knowledge of news work (Green Gonzalez, 2017). White's (1950) work contrasts with Breed's (1955), who developed the concept of social control in the newsroom and identified leaders of any news organisation as those with authority to establish a policy stating that in an ideal democracy there would be no need for control, or a policy. Breed's understanding was that editorial policy is covert and defined as "consistent orientation shown by a paper, not only in its editorial but in its news columns and headlines as well, concerning selected issues and events" (p. 327).

Molotch and Lester (1974) introduced another dimension: by suspending the belief that an objective and reportable world exists; they developed the concept that news is a constructed reality. Their premise was that "the result is a process of news creation, a kind of accounting procedure, accomplished according to the occasional event needs of those with access to media" (p. 101). The news does not reflect the 'real world', it reflects the practices of those with the power to determine the experience of others. They advocated a study of the media based around the event, and methods through which those with access determine the process.

Having noted that news is created, as opposed to selected, and that it is the product of the methods journalists employ, their routine is consequently central to his study. Fishman (1988) introduced what he called the bureaucratic foundation of news exposure: that the reporter is regularly exposed to other journalists' view of society, in a bureaucratic setting, and this is the basis on which they can detect events. This perspective provides journalists with a map of relevant experts from whom to acquire knowledge and topics of newsworthy happenings.

Tied to this, Gans (2004) reported on the roles that information sources, audiences and people who exert pressure to censor the news play in the total process, as well as on commercial and other considerations. He moved into how the selection of stories is routinised and his point was that freedom of the press can only exist if the journalist is detached from the political process and free to decide what news is.

Tuchman (1978) noted that the media cannot present what the public is interested in knowing and approaches the concept of construction of reality through the theory of framing, a more active approach. She felt that it is the journalist and the media that create reality meaning news does not mirror reality. News construction gives reality to the world but cannot reproduce exactly what has occurred defining routines as ritual. For her, objectivity was yet another ritual. Fishman (1988) goes one step further: starting with the premise that the story is always distorted, interested in understanding the process from which this distortion results. This position counters the classic theory of objectivity: that it lies within the journalist and not within the organisational routines.

Epstein, Gans, Tuchman, Fishman, and Molotch and Lester assumed that the character of those involved in news production will influence content, a hypothesis which sits well with journalistic mythology and opposes the notion of organisational and technological determinism (McQuail, 2010). Journalists receive subtle or implicit nudges, rather than explicit instructions,

to change the editorial line or modify some of the content of news coverage. Answering this concern, Schudson (2011) moved away from the journalist-centred construction of reality and writes about structure and the necessary compression of news which can create distortion. calling this socially organised distortion, built into the structures and routines of news gathering. He highlights the issue of "bias" in this context, implying that the owner, editor or reporter knows what the real event looks like but will colour it to advance economic or ideological gain. Like Tuchman (1978), Schudson posits that bias is more adequately explained by replacing it with the concept of framing.

In essence, these studies assert that the organisational requirements of news, combined with professional ideology of objectivity, routinely privilege the voices of the powerful (Davies, 2019; Curran & Seaton, 2018). These mass media sociologists agree that the nature of truth, impartiality, fairness, credibility, accuracy and detachment have been routinised because they are a practical necessity for journalists in their quest to guarantee objectivity in the news. This is the context in which the American media model of the news-making process needs to be understood – a context that will help frame the ways news is constructed within the small state of Malta.

Case Studies

Malta Today

Malta Today initially seems very similar to other news organisations subject to time pressures and limited resources operating in a polarised political environment. Findings infer that the dominance of political parties in news journalism and elsewhere is not considered acceptable by this organisation. Consequently, it transpired that this news organisation could

run stories that were politically sensitive, and which contested both political parties. Yet, this did not mean that *Malta Today* did not have affiliations or agendas. Links existed with political parties, and it emerged that this news organisation had an influential proprietor, who was its Managing Editor. His influence was central to the publication's identity, though not tied to the main political parties. This enabled his journalists to pursue their stories unencumbered.

This case study presented an organisation which had a routine structure allowing for a divergence of views with different political positions within the same news platform. This was an organisation that had diverse forms of advocacy notwithstanding the executive involvement of the owner. Journalists within *Malta Today* espoused their view in an open and transparent manner following a form of agenda driven journalism. However, this resulted in an organisation which revealed forms of internal and external pluralism with a culture that encouraged this demeanour.

This gave rise to a rift within the organisation, its journalists vying for control over the news they covered. What happened within this organisation must be contextualised, not only within the country's regional media system, but also by its nature as a polarized state. demonstrating that, by varying degrees, it is the very fabric of Maltese journalism to advocate. This engendered coping mechanisms that differentiate the Maltese system from an American Liberal media system and its model of objectivity. By not providing clear political direction, the leadership of *Malta Today* created a vacuum of influence where journalists sought independence, for political and ideological reasons.

The choices made in *Malta Today* demonstrated that it was averse to taking a clear position of favour for any political party. The decision to allow journalists to cover events that appealed to their own political belief systems attests to this, and the textual analysis underlined it. This organisation allowed advocacy to dominate the way news was positioned, with its journalists presenting polar views. This was a form of balance, though it is very different from

the balance we would expect in an American Liberal media system. At *Malta Today,* coverage was not neutral and did not attempt to be so; it demonstrated to its readers and viewers that it was able to cover both sides of the political spectrum.

The journalists at *Malta Today* had a considerable degree of autonomy and were not constrained by conventions of objectivity. The result was an internally pluralistic form of advocacy journalism geared to a polarised society. The findings indicated that journalists at *Malta Today* defined its news, under strong leadership that allowed and facilitated this. With this in hand, we can consolidate our findings in the context of three areas of exploration: the role of proximity in a small state, the role of journalists' agency, and the type of advocacy that is being practiced within this organisation.

Proximity and the small state

The priming of the text elucidates that this news organisation did have an agenda, and the textual analysis showed it was to deal with each event as sympathetically as possible, irrespective of the political party being covered. We noted this was achieved by sending journalists to cover events run by the political party they sympathised with. This is an important issue as it highlighted that the political slant of the journalist was known to the audience and to the party being covered not surprising in the context of Malta being a small state. The proximity of the relationships between all parties – the audience, other journalists, the sources, and politicians – allowed this knowledge to be widely shared.

We found that, while one would expect the different operational processes to have a dulling effect on a journalist's slant, multitasking was the norm, and allowed the figurative signature of the individual journalist to be left on their finished work. This is possible because the journalist was involved in all stages of the creation of news, which is a direct result of the small size of the market, the state, and the organisation itself. The routines of the organisations must be understood in the context of scale and proximity.

Journalists' agency

This organisation's editorial positioning created tension within the newsroom, with several journalists suggesting a manifestation of the freedom given to the organisation's journalists to present what they believed was news. The very fact that this internal debate was so intense confirmed that news workers within the organisation were able to introduce different dimensions and ways of expressing the issues facing their country. While this internal debate could have been destructive, in effect it helped enhance the credibility of this news organisation. This was heightened by an overriding concern at ownership and editorial level to give free rein to the journalists in their political coverage, allowing them to frame their own stories.

This news organisation did not fit the Polarised Pluralist model presented by Hallin and Mancini (2004); the lack of editorial interference is reflected in the interviews with *Malta Today* journalists. The detail that does stand out, is that it was the journalists at *Malta Today* who controlled the framing of their organisation's news. Their commitment and agency were a determining element.

Advocacy

Here lies the crucial characteristic of this organisation. Advocacy existed within this organisation, with no effort from the owners to influence the political framing that each journalist provides. Findings showed that the frames in the text represented different ends of the political spectrum, characterising both sides in this polarised state. Malta's high level of politicisation was reflected in the newsroom of *Malta Today* and its routines, which allowed for both views to flourish. This had implications for understanding of the role of the individual journalist and divergent advocacy agendas within the same newsroom.

Findings demonstrated the presence of a type of bi-polar advocacy and noted that, for it to exist, two things had to be present: firstly, an ownership and routine system which allowed

for this system to manifest itself; secondly, it required a type of journalist who was ready to put their belief system front and centre in their work. It was apparent that in this organisation internal pluralism was a tool to deal with a polarised market. This was a pluralistic form of advocacy journalism, geared to the polarised Maltese society. This is different from what was present in Polarised Pluralist states, and from an American Liberal media system; indeed, this is a crucial component of Maltese journalism which is entirely distinct from other countries. The agency of these journalists allowed them to determine the level of advocacy, which suggested a kind of monitoring system within this organisation.

TVM, the public's news service

TVM is presented as a public service broadcaster with a diverse spectrum of issues prevalent in this polarised state. Findings exposed how a news organisation can neuter itself to cope with the consequences of a polarised environment and create a form of advocacy which reflects a journalism averse to crossing self-defined boundaries. This was a consequence of internal monitoring and social pressure emanating from outside the organisation as a direct consequence of proximity to the political class and the organisation's audience.

TVM forms part of the state-owned Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and, it could be expected that most news constructed to present a one-sided position, akin to that of a Polarised Pluralist system. Yet, what was found was a broadcaster who had 'neutered' its position, to avoid controversy and create balance. The reasons behind this were not the same as in an American Liberal media system and, in effect, *TVM* chose to neuter itself as a form of self-preservation to circumvent crossing political, social, and cultural boundaries.

Being wholly owned by the Government of Malta *TVM's* senior staff, including the Board of Directors and Editorial Board, were appointed by the state. This meant that the government of the day choose the Head of News and, consequently, could influence the way news is constructed. This process was repeated with every new political administration. In this environment, news workers were aware of what was expected of them because of their political affiliation. Yet, its internal socialisation seemed to engender a risk-averse mentality.

The case study showcases an organisation where routines conspired to limit interpretation, analysis, and investigation in the newsroom, with checks and balances aimed at averting controversy. This was a public broadcaster in a Mediterranean region facing the realities of a polarised media system inventing different ways to confront issues of proximity in a small state. In this arena, the members of this organisation had to face what is, in effect, a potential change in ownership with every electoral cycle demanding a flexible attitude and approach.

The overriding idiosyncrasy discovered within this organisation was the way its routines, culture and socialisation conspired together to create a risk-averse news organisation. That *TVM* elected to omit a comments section from its news portal, a decision that could impact external pluralism, emphasises this. On the other hand, the findings indicated that the Board of Directors did not interfere in the construction of news. The findings revealed that there was an attempt, at an organisational level, to shield *TVM's* journalists from the political parties.

The Head of News was personally responsible, for *TVM's* news output. He could ignore any direction from the Editorial Board, and this resulted in a layer of insulation around the newsroom to protect it from executive, commercial and political interests. The construction of news was ultimately directed by the Head of News a direction that determined that *TVM* reported and did not comment. The strategy was to report without opinion and exclude analysis,

which represented an avoidance of controversy, and was used as a device to deflect the wrath of political parties. This was a coping mechanism – to shield the journalists at *TVM*.

New recruits underwent a form of socialisation in the *TVM* environment: emphasising what it means to be the national broadcaster. The feeling that it was crucial to be 'balanced' was expressed, with the definition of this built on the idea of giving equal time and space to the main political parties. This formed an important part of the self-identity of many of *TVM's* journalists. It was explained that the monitoring of *TVM* by the BA made it an absolute necessity to ensure this balance, and reporters are resigned to avoid analysis and opinion in the presentation of the news.

Proximity and the small state

Findings noted that TVM journalists understood where their self-imposed boundaries were and that none of them intended to cross any. These boundaries were tied to an external culture which the journalists believed was prevalent in this small state and could be understood when examined through a lens of proximity. The norm was to be faced with pressure from the political class, which took the form of streams of complaints to the BA from major parties. With this, and because of political allegiance, journalists applied pressure to themselves to remain neutral, creating internal surveillance.

The main concern expressed through the interviews was the type of pressure brought to bear on them through their core circle of relationships with friends and family, an issue which could only be understood in the context of a small nation. That their role was, as seen from the outside, "obviously" to appease the party in government was almost unanimously denied. The strain from working in a polarised society resulted in a form of sanitised news occurring in story selection and how each was reported. The textual analysis clearly this with *TVM's* public-service obligation used as the justification for their choice of news. In this way, we can

understand why the text shows a dulling normalisation of events during the electoral campaign, which reads as a form of neutered news.

Journalists' agency

Journalists at *TVM* were defined by their position within the PBS and their role was to not upset or create upheaval, to the extent that the normalisation of events in the country is seen as part of the public service. No evidence of direct political interference was demonstrated, though there were issues that the journalists knew, almost intuitively, that they should not address. The key barrier that defined the type of news presented is not Government intervention per se, but the whole political class.

The journalists at this organisation did have a political affiliation which they restrained for all the reasons expressed and indicated in the textual analysis. In this respect, at *TVM* the role of the journalist was limited, as a direct result of a hierarchical structure within the organisation, as well as political and cultural issues resultant of proximity and prevalent in a small state. *TVM* did not fit into the model presented by Hallin and Mancini (2004) of what would be expected from a state broadcaster in a Polarised Pluralist system. Unlike at *Malta Today,* the journalists at *TVM* largely resisted the urge to assert their own political leaning, and they restrained their journalistic agency. This was a case of self-preservation, a coping mechanism.

Advocacy

The textual analysis showed that a very limited form of advocacy emerged, appearing at moments of heightened political and social pressure. In this sense, *TVM* demonstrated a second form of advocacy distinct from that presented within *Malta Today*. It reflected the political loyalty of the individual journalists and was unobvious in its presence, appearing in the editing, translation and drafting processes of the news construction at *TVM*. This advocacy was not heavily slanted towards either political party and was, therefore, still neutralised. These elements show that, while *TVM* did endeavour to maintain a neutrality-based system akin to an

American Liberal media model, it achieves this for contrasting reasons with different consequences. It transpired that *TVM* would err on the side of caution, producing an advocacy with limitations – a neutered form of advocacy.

The presence within *TVM* of any form of advocacy was important because it positions itself as an organisation in a distinct way from *Malta Today.* At *TVM,* advocacy was subtle, removed from the forthright tone of the other case studies. It stood at a significantly different point from *Malta Today*. We begin to realise that differing forms of advocacy could be one of the defining factors of Malta's media system sparking the idea that the presence of journalists with divergent political allegiances results in internal moderation. The presence of advocacy makes this possible.

Times of Malta

The historical roots of news organisations can be a crucial factor in the way its culture and routines converge to determine how news is constructed. This case study showed that, while the construction of news was primarily driven by its editorial staff, this happened for different reasons from those witnessed at *Malta Today* and *TVM*. The findings established that a form of measured advocacy existed at *Times of Malta* different from that of the other two case studies, and that part of the reason behind this lay in the publication's organisational routines and the performance of its central leadership.

While it can be argued that the very creation of *Times of Malta* was the result of political parallelism, it evolved into a news organisation that, during pivotal times, did not shy away from controversy, for which it paid the price (Aquilina, 2010). For most of its history it was an organisation run and owned by an aristocratic English family who, in later years, passed its ownership to a foundation. Within this news organisation the construction of news was driven

by editorial staff through a coming-together of like-minded individuals. This resulted in a linear form of advocacy which could have consequences for internal pluralism.

While the other news organisations researched had one level of final editorial decision-making, *Times of Malta* has a system of three separate editors, each of which had their own spheres of responsibility. The textual analysis showed this was part of the reason behind the way news was constructed within this organisation. Ultimately, the text did not present explicit and vexatious slants. The video footage used was not obviously edited to skew reality. Rather, it was the choice of stories which *Times of Malta* followed that shapes the narrative and the way news was constructed.

What emerged was an organisation that had a clear and established political position. A political slant at the shareholder and directorial level existed which sat uncomfortably with the stated aims of the majority shareholder, the Strickland Foundation, as well as Times of Malta itself. This was also exacerbated by changes in routines. While the aims of the organisation and main shareholders correspond to those of an idealised Liberal American media system, the journalists and editorial staff had a high degree of autonomy because they were not constrained by conventions of objectivity or bureaucratic routines. This ran counter to the sociology of news narrative found in the literature.

Proximity and the small state

The research established that the relationships between the shareholders and board of directors could be understood because of the intimacy inherent to a small state. An understanding of the networks of links between individuals indicated the potential spheres of influence that could come into play. In this way, we found members at both the shareholder and directorial level whose lives and relationships intersect. Perhaps, in another context, in a larger state, it would be unusual to meet individuals with so many long-standing relationships and, resultantly, who work in a figuratively incestuous way. It is not unusual in this small state,

nor is it unusual for these influences to co-exist. Relationships are widely known in the Maltese context, so the audience could factor this into their interpretation of the news (Sammut, 2007).

A further issue which arose was the limitation of sources. Findings demonstrated that most of the sources emanated from one political party, because of what seemed to be a breakdown in communication between the government and editorial staff at *Times of Malta*. Most journalists complemented each other's political dispositions. None of the interviewees mentioned that this was the result of a recruitment policy, so may be accounted for by the editorial team's choice of like-minded individuals. Equally, the organisation did not appeal to journalists with opposing political ideals. Size limits the pool of resources; however, it is not the only factor reducing the availability of potential news workers.

Journalists' agency

The political stance of *Times of Malta* allowed for a unidirectional approach to the way news was constructed. The interview showed that the drive of the organisation was to underline the chosen narrative; that is, to question government's credibility. Ultimately, this has always been one of the keynotes of any news organisation, to hold power to account, and is a central tenet of a Liberal media system. But it can also be said that dissenting voices did not present their case within this newsroom. The interviewees suggested a lack of trust within the newsroom, resulting in a change of routines. The reason behind this was implied to be that information was being leaked to third parties and, as a result, the daily newsroom meetings were stopped. This removed an important forum for the discussion of what stories and questions to pursue and indicated an impact on internal pluralism. The result was that, within the newsroom, if a story departed from the newspapers' primary narrative this was treated as a distraction. Organisational routines did not sustain conventions of balance and objectivity.

It seemed there could be one primary reason which allowed this to happen: there was no central leadership at an editorial level. This, in turn, created a vacuum of leadership in two

areas: there was no one who could take a final decision on what the editorial policy of the organisation was, and there was no one who was directly responsible for all news workers at the highest editorial level. It therefore became extremely difficult to retain control of the newsroom. The more vociferous elements held sway. It could also be stated that this aligns with what is elucidated in the literature, with Gans, Epstein, Tuchman and Fishman assuming that the character of the journalist will influence the news in a Liberal media system. A position that sits well with journalistic mythology.

Advocacy

Advocacy journalism had a strong presence within *Times of Malta.* This emerged from the interviews and textual analysis, which showed to be a form of linear advocacy – clear, uniform and prevalent in most of the material studied. This form of advocacy resulted from several compounding factors related specifically to *Times of Malta*. The position of the shareholders, the position of the board of directors and the historical positioning of the organisation all played their part in the way news was constructed. This was a form of advocacy which was very different from that which was present in the other case studies with *Times of Malta* closer to the British press, where advocacy follows a set editorial line.

If we were to compare the advocacy present at *Times of Malta* to the other case studies, we recognised that this organisation sits on the opposite side of an advocacy continuum from *TVM*. Different from the advocacy found at *Malta Today,* in that it did not present the divergent views we see there. Findings established that this linear form of advocacy negated the need for internal monitoring. The presence of this aggressive kind of advocacy created a form of monitory of the state which went beyond the watchdog function of the press towards a guard dog function. Here the press was actively engaged in its opposition to the government and went beyond observing and reporting. The result was that the political positioning of the organisation defaulted to what its journalists believed should be their personal slant, a combination of their personal inclination and of the historical inclination of the news organisation.

Conclusion

This work questioned whether Malta was moving towards a more Liberal American media system, as seems to be the case in other Southern Mediterranean systems experiencing a decline in political partisanship (Philips, 2015). While Sammut (2007) recognised that Maltese journalism is polarised, she elaborated on her observations, stating that the Maltese population has an acute understanding of how the news is constructed and indicated that the population desired that Maltese journalism move towards a more liberal media system, with balance and objectivity as its central tenet. While Sammut's (2007) laudable work and hope for a more liberal form of news runs parallel to prevailing trends within the Southern Mediterranean region (Elvistad & Philips, 2018) this has not happened in Malta.

Sammut (2007), asserted that, despite its limitations, advocacy journalism still has an impact on participatory democracy; thus, the idiosyncrasies of the Maltese system have implications for media and social theory. This is crucial, as it directs us to explore the media milieu in the context of a Polarised Pluralist system, directing our attention to understand Malta within this geographical sphere. All this being said, she could not have foreseen the increasing level of polarisation in the Maltese Media system and therefore did not discern the complexity of the advocacy models advanced in this paper.

Polarisation and advocacy

This research positions advocacy as a tangential notion of professional journalism guided by the ideals of objectivity and public service. In a Maltese context, advocacy is a form of political mobilisation that seeks to increase the power of people and groups and to make institutions more responsive to human needs. Until the ascendency of objectivity, journalism

was largely advocacy journalism, possibly a propaganda tool for political organisations (Tucher, 2022; Starr, 2004). This is a position established present in Malta (Hillman, 2022).

Advocacy journalism should be understood as a form that must maintain high standards of factual accuracy, fairness and thoroughness, and the idea is becoming more prevalent in academia that objectivity is an outdated and unachievable myth (Laws & Chojnika, 2020). This understanding of advocacy recognises that journalists will come to stories with inherent biases and places a heavy onus on journalists who practice it to be even more assiduous sub-editors than their mainstream counterparts. Advocacy journalism can be truthful, accurate and credible, acknowledging the journalist's perspective without silencing opposing views, even to the extent that they may report scandals that support their opposition.

Yet it should be acknowledged that advocacy journalism has remained marginal throughout the twentieth century as mainstream media organisations embraced the notion of objectivity (Tucher, 2022). This has resulted in a divergence of understanding between what advocacy is and what it can be, creating a reluctance in editors and academics to allow advocacy into the newsroom. For some, advocacy journalism is indistinguishable from propaganda, which they identify as in conflict with the values of the democratic press, for example truth-telling and accuracy. While distrust is present in Malta, it can be argued that professional ideals are present but that they do not eliminate personal sympathies – they simply restrain them.

With this consideration we should recognise there is a side to advocacy which can enhance the growth of civic involvement, driven by the notion that news media should be a tool for social change. It helps spotlight issues that are ignored in the mainstream media and can galvanise a population into strong civic direction. Yet those who defend objectivity disapprove of this style of journalism, regardless of the intentions behind it. Ultimately,

maintaining journalistic fairness and integrity should be a priority, irrespective of the motivations of sources and news subjects.

Three different forms of advocacy at three different Maltese news organisations were identified. At *TVM*, the external polarisation surrounding the organisation resulted in the creation of boundaries which, in turn, occasioned what we have named a 'neutered advocacy'. The very polarisation that was being stoked outside the organisation was replicated within, but the consequences were not what would be expected in a Polarised Pluralist state. This polarisation resulted in checks within the organisation, with a significant amount of self-censorship taking place. Here, the research found that the routines within this organisation centred around the position of the Head of News. By ensuring it was understood that he would personally check every news item, the Head of News was able to implement his ideal of a neutral non-confrontational reportage.

Journalists within this organisation had links to the main political parties, however, this resulted in a form of neutralisation – a consequence of internal scrutiny. This meant that at the state-owned organisation where, in a Polarised Pluralist system, we would anticipate a significant level of state intervention, this political motivation was also muffled, resulting from internal surveillance by the journalists themselves. This happened despite concerted efforts by those in power to manipulate the news through regular complaints, filed to the Broadcasting Authority (BA).

Consequently, it can be surmised that the reporting of news with balance and impartiality within *TVM* was a coping mechanism for reporting in a highly polarised state. Here we had a publication that is precluding contention by remaining neutral and being descriptive rather than evaluative. This neutered advocacy offered a form of balance, creating a dispassionate voice, which is important within a polarised society, as it brings to the fore a crucial dimension in the way news is being constructed.

At *Malta Today* advocacy was prevalent, with journalists presenting divergent frames and creating what can be called 'bi-polar advocacy' – identified as another coping mechanism which this news organisation adopted to present widely differing views. Journalists were allowed to advocate for the causes they believe in. Even though the owners of this organisation had a history of political involvement, this did not limit the type of journalist or journalism within the organisation.

Unusually, *Malta Today* had a Managing Editor shareholder who partook in the day-to-day running of the organisation. Notwithstanding, the interviewees made clear that the owners did not intrude on the way their stories were constructed. Therefore, commercial considerations did not override conviction in the public purpose of this journalism. This had consequences on the way the news was reported, as contesting news items with divergent interpretations of events were uploaded within minutes of each other. The presence of bi-polar advocacy demonstrated the functioning of routines allowing journalists to express their own belief systems. Through the daily newsroom meeting, all journalists participated in the decision-making process on how news was constructed, and allowed for a collective discussion on story selection, framing, and the sources of each news item.

Times of Malta exhibited an obvious and directed form of advocacy, where the organisation ownership, structure, routines, historical culture, and editorial policy were all aligned. At this news organisation, a clear level of advocacy occurred which did not gravitate towards the party in government. Individuals with relationships and political ties at ownership level, board level and in the newsroom were present. Yet, it transpires that not all journalists were comfortable with this arrangement. The organisation changed its routines to cope with an increasing presence of advocacy and resulted in a breakdown of communication within the newsroom.

Notwithstanding, these changed routines created a transparent and coherent form of what we called 'linear advocacy'. The production of news with linear advocacy demonstrated the presence of a comprehensive political line at *Times of Malta,* leaving no doubt as to its political position. The result was an explicit form of advocacy, meaning it did not conceal its news agenda. In this case, we have an organisation that followed its historic trend and marshalled its journalism and sources into a linear political direction.

These disparate forms of advocacy constitute three structures of decision-making that are a response to a polarised and politically involved society. The presence of these forms of advocacy illuminated a paradox: these journalists claim to be custodians of public conscience, but without applying to their work their personal morality about the principles of objectivity which are central to an idealised American liberal media system. The textual analysis showed that only *TVM* attempted to sustain a neutral voice. As such, this forces us to question the role of objectivity within this media system.

However, this work shows that there is a strong case to be made for valuing journalists who present news from a particular perspective, resulting in knowledge that is partial, yet honest, open, and debatable, too. This type of journalism would intend to be critical, thus averting the risk of failing to see how embedded their own claims are in their writing. With this reflection in mind, we should begin to consider advocacy as a continuum (Wilson, 2015) between different representations, as indicated in Chart 1, rather than a simplified depiction of opposites.

Chart 1: An advocacy continuum
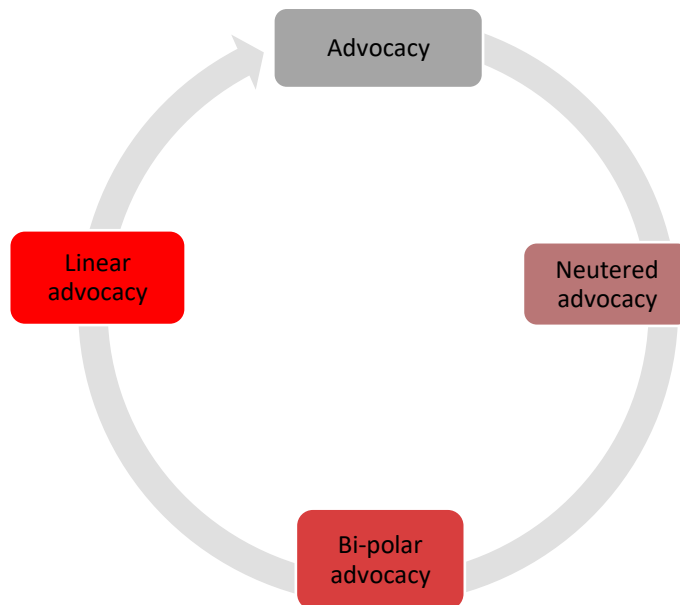
Each form of advocacy found in this research has its own value and signposts the position that none is superior to the rest. This research reveals that advocacy can serve a function in the democratic process because it recognises that journalism must not be judged by its camouflaged ideologies, but by the ideological views it transparently supports. By questioning the very existence of neutrality, it becomes more reasonable to move away from distinguishing between objectivity and advocacy, and towards an appreciation of the various types that exist.

Strengths and weaknesses of the Maltese media system

When considering the atypical positioning of the Maltese media system discussed thus far, a case for an exceptional definition of the nation's media system, with reference to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) Polarised Pluralist model, can be built. They helpfully identify the advocacy tradition in Mediterranean countries. Although this is valuable, findings have shown it cannot account for the complexity of Maltese society. This research argues that the central

role of the state in the Southern Mediterranean media systems has limited the tendency of the media to play watchdog, a role widely valued in the prevailing liberal media theory. Yet, it was found that the presence of more complex forms of advocacy in Malta has resulted in a significant 'watchdog' presence, akin to the interventionist approach espoused by Hanitzsch et al (2019). Together with this, unlike other Mediterranean states, Malta has a relatively expansive media market and a high level of public engagement with the news. Although political parallelism has a marked presence, we must qualify how far the media system reflects the major political divisions in this society.

The high level of news consumption in Malta can be equated with democratic involvement (European Commission, 2022). Here we have a media system which contrasts with the Mediterranean model. Hallin and Mancini (2004) make the point that the polarisation tradition is essentially an elite form of journalism; newspapers with very low circulation are, essentially, a conversation between political elites. By contrast, Maltese news media have a high penetration if we total their online and offline reach, demonstrating these publications are not simply an exchange between political elites. Rather, they are inclusive of the whole population, joining into the wider political debate and make themselves a force of political integration precisely because they are successful in engaging the attention of the public.

Malta does not exhibit the level of professionalism we would expect to find in a Polarised Pluralist system, as proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Journalistic autonomy exists and a significant agency was exercised in their work. Journalists in two of the news organisations studied had authority over their work throughout the news production process. Unlike what you would expect from a Polarised Pluralist system, Malta also has distinct professional norms, including ethical principles, such as the duty to protect professional sources, to maintain a separation between editorial content and advertising, and to follow common standards of newsworthiness.

While acknowledging that the Maltese media system is one which opts for neither an idealised American liberal media system nor a Southern European one, Maltese journalism supports the public in its involvement in the democratic process because activist news encourages political participation. The system empowers social groups and has a PBS which can appeal to a large audience and construct news in a neutral way, nourishing a news form that is believed to best serve the public's interest. Perhaps what is lacking in the Maltese case is a public broadcaster that is more evaluative, pugnacious, and aggressive in its positioning, thus creating a more interpretive approach.

In this media system, the news has deeply ingrained links to communities of interest and this research is a call to recognise that it nurtures a different type of journalism with an essential role in Malta's functioning democracy. It is a form that strives to combine radical democracy with a more deliberative perspective, because a healthy democracy should be informed to be sustained. In Malta, information dissemination may take on various shapes, but the result is a news system that fulfils its purported role of speaking truth to power for an involved electorate. This is exemplified by the exceptional electoral turnout and political engagement in Maltese society and implies that Malta's political parties are not disconnected from their base (IDEA, 2022). In responding to the views of different parties, the media system is being representative, because the political parties are likewise representative, in contrast to many countries where the public feels disconnected from the political class.

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